

*Copy for Mr. Kent*

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4 September 1959

Dear Mr. Dulles:

You asked me, in our conversation three weeks ago, what could be done to make our estimates more readable, more persuasive, and more forceful. This is a problem which has worried me for some time and which probably can never be completely solved.

Two factors in particular make it difficult to prepare short, pithy and vivid papers. In the first place, something like 50 people take part in drafting, revising, and coordinating each estimate. When they have all had their say, the paper is almost sure to be loaded down with qualifications, hesitations and explanations. Even worse, any vigorous phrase or unusual expression is sure to be objected to by some one, usually on the grounds that it overstates the case, or that it could be misunderstood by a perverse reader. There is thus a strong tendency to accept the worn-out phrases which have been consecrated by long usage. Not all drafters can write good prose; those who can must be discouraged by the way in which their best efforts are battered by successive waves of coordination.

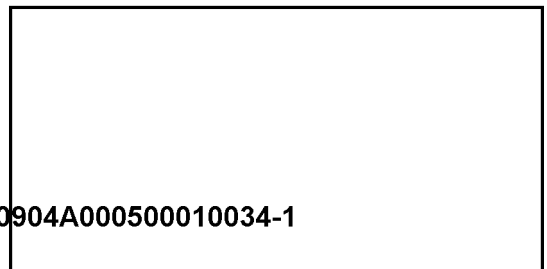
In the second place, many estimates, by their very nature, must be long and tedious. There is clearly a need, for example, for an agreed intelligence position on the economic development and military potential of the USSR. I doubt that any writer can discuss ballistic missiles in sparkling prose, or that any consumer can thoroughly enjoy an analysis of Soviet production figures. As far as I can judge from the surveys which have been made, our most constant readers are not top policy makers, but staff members who want to know the consensus of opinion of the intelligence community about a great many matters in some detail. This group will not be satisfied by short and highly generalized papers.

Admitting these difficulties, I still think that we could make some improvements in our estimates. My basic ideas are that we should distinguish more than we do among different types of estimates, and that some matters now treated in estimates should be handled in a less formal way.

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1) We should each year prepare some short estimates, dealing with key questions, aimed at the top policy makers. These papers should make only a few points, and should not go into detail on any point. They should be coordinated by representatives who have a high degree of responsibility in their respective agencies, and should be more thoroughly discussed by USIB than the ordinary estimate. The following questions illustrate the sort of problems I have in mind: will the USSR be stronger militarily than the US in X years? can NATO survive in its present form? are there significant differences between the USSR and Communist China on political strategy and tactics?

2) At the other extreme are the long, factual papers which convey the consensus of opinion of the intelligence community to hundreds of briefers, drafters, and staff assistants in Washington and throughout the world. Very little can be done to improve the text of these estimates, for the reasons already mentioned. But I think that we should make another try at improving the conclusions. They are the only parts of long papers which may be read by top policy makers; in any case they supply the basis for the briefings by staff members of their principals.

Conclusions at present are largely excerpts from the text. They are often drafted under great pressure by men who have been wearied by a long process of coordination. The connection between one paragraph and the next is frequently not clear; this failing is aggravated when USIB members insist on moving sentences or whole paragraphs up into the conclusions, even though the added material is not especially important. The result is that conclusions are usually less readable than the text.

Our drafters could certainly prepare conclusions at an earlier stage in their work, before they had become enmeshed in detail. It would probably help them in their drafting if they began by stating clearly and briefly the chief points which they wished to make. Conclusions prepared in this way would be better organized and more readable than they now are. But this method of preparing conclusions would do no good unless USIB members, and their representatives, were willing to adopt two self-denying rules. They would have to accept the principle that conclusions are not to follow the text slavishly, but are to be independent, and much more generalized statements of the basic estimates made in the paper. They would also have to resist the temptation to load down the conclusions with material of secondary importance.

3) Between the special estimates on key questions and the long papers on standard subjects come the estimates on short-term problems. They are the most numerous group, and in many ways represent the most remarkable achievement of the intelligence community. I shall never cease to be amazed, both by the speed with which they are prepared and by the skill which is shown in analyzing obscure and complicated situations.

But I think that our success has led us to abuse the process a little and to overwork both CIA staff and agency representatives. The number of short-term estimates could be somewhat reduced while their quality could be improved.

The chief difficulties I have with short-term estimates are a) that they sometimes cover too limited a time-span and b) that they sometimes deal with problems which can be understood only in a wider context. For example, while we can probably estimate with some confidence that Iraq will not go Communist next month, it would do no good, and perhaps some harm to say so in an NIE. The real problem is whether the situation there is such that the Communists will have a good chance of taking over in the next few years. Again, I see little excuse for an NIE on Nepal. Basic information on the country should be recorded in an NIS. Nepal is significant to us only in the wider context of Sino-Indian relations, and the problems of Nepal cannot be understood except by estimating the policies of its more powerful neighbors. In short, an open-ended estimate is likely to be better, and remain valid longer, than one with a very limited period. A small-country estimate will have more significance if it is related to wider problems of the area.

4) Finally, there are some situations where internal CIA papers may be more helpful than coordinated estimates. There are cases where precise information is lacking, and intuition and experience are almost the only guides. CIA has no monopoly on these qualities, but it is perhaps in a better position to profit from them than agencies such as State and Defense which feel that they must Do Something right away. Our recent Laos and Ethiopian memoranda are examples of this kind of work. I doubt that these papers would have been improved by coordination and they might well have been made worse. There are also cases in which one or two factors in a complex and thoroughly studied situation have changed, for example, the growing split in the Japanese majority party. Here again, a full-dress estimate hardly seems necessary and an internal document would probably be sufficient. I realize that there is already a tendency in this direction and I hope that the intelligence community will not object to it.

This is a long letter and I know that you will have no time to consider it in the immediate future. Perhaps we can talk about it at one of the Princeton meetings.

Sincerely yours,

[Redacted Signature]

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